

CHAPTER 1: THE CHARACTER OF FLATHEAD COUNTY

“Successful land use retains the quality and the character of Flathead Valley, the grandeur of the scenery and natural resources while accommodating the population on a very human scale: open space, air & water quality, no sprawl, safe traffic.”

-Lakeside Resident, 01/09/06

Introduction

The character of a community may be defined as the unique cultural and physical attributes of a particular location. Nowhere else in the world looks and feels the same as downtown Bigfork or rural Marion. The irony is that growth fueled by the attractive character of our community is the same growth that can ultimately change it. High-density residential development has the potential to change the character of a rural area and create safety and health hazards if not properly guided. Similarly, low density development in areas with adequate facilities and services can be inefficient. Some responsible developments voluntarily mitigate these impacts while others do not. A growth policy can establish goals and policies that build a foundation for safe and healthy growth that mitigates the impacts on Flathead County’s most valued characteristics.

PART 1: The Seven Elements of the Public’s Vision

Identifying the most beloved characteristics of Flathead County and creating goals, policies and regulations to guide growth is important to future generations of Flathead County residents. The public involvement process identified seven primary objectives for the future of Flathead County (see Appendix B: Public Involvement Summary).

Protect the Views

One characteristic that residents of Flathead County cherish is the view. Views of mountains, lakes, forests, wildlife, and open spaces are cited as characteristics the residents of Flathead County would not change. “Scenic resources” are valued throughout the county regardless of age, gender or location.

The Flathead County Growth Policy will set goals for protecting views of mountains, forests, lakes and rivers as enjoyed from public spaces and for protecting the “wide open spaces” feel of rural Flathead County. Policies encourage growth that is non-detrimental to scenic resources and fostering of development opportunities that do not rob future generations of daily enjoyment of open spaces.

Promote a Diverse Economy

The character of the Flathead County economy was frequently identified as an opportunity for improvement. The residents of Flathead County desire a diverse economy that respects our heritage as a primary producer and promotes development of

other sectors of the economy not traditionally found in rural Montana. Residents envision low unemployment and well-paying jobs. The cost of living and home ownership should be affordable to the median income.

One of the ways the Growth Policy influences economic diversity is by setting goals and policies to keep the jurisdiction attractive to present and future economic engines. Maintaining and promoting the unique character of Flathead County through the Growth Policy insures that Flathead County continues to attract economic engines seeking the “western rural lifestyle” and offering well-paying jobs to a qualified workforce.

Minimize Traffic

Increasing traffic and decreasing quality of roads was frequently cited as negatively impacting the character of Flathead County. Residents that participated in scoping meetings documented how increasing traffic reminded them of more suburban communities and how a growth policy should address traffic volume, flow and safety.

As the population of any area increases, so will traffic volume and no single factor creates or fixes traffic. The Growth Policy addresses traffic by examining a variety of public facilities and local services that impact the entire transportation network in a community. Land use patterns that impact traffic flow and volume are also reviewed. The Growth Policy identifies goals for locating and designing roads that mitigate traffic flow and safety issues.

Maintain the Identity of Rural Communities

Preserving the rural lifestyle is an opportunity identified by many Flathead County residents. The ability to live “the simple life” and own land in a safe, quiet, and environmentally pristine neighborhood away from cities is a characteristic many residents cherish.

Preventing communities from growing together and losing their unique identities was another concern of many scoping meeting participants. The concern of seeing Flathead County turn into one continuous sprawling development was expressed in a variety of ways. Many residents of Flathead County do not want to see strip malls, used-car lots, mini-storage, warehouse stores, lumber yards, and other visually dominating land uses disrupt the feeling of driving between unique rural communities.

The Growth Policy develops goals for protecting both the identity of individual communities and the overall rural character of Flathead County. Policies to achieve the goals balance the economic importance of growth and development with the need to protect the same characteristics that attract growth.

Protect Access to and Interaction with Parks and Recreation

Outdoor recreation opportunities were a characteristic that defined the feel of Flathead County to many residents. From silent sports to motor sports, continued access to public lands and water bodies was a concern raised by many scoping meeting participants,

The Flathead County Growth Policy addresses the impact that growth can have on access to recreation as well as the quality of the forest, water bodies and parks that are the foundation of recreation in Flathead County. Goals for recreation facilities and services offered by Flathead County are addressed.

Properly Manage and Protect the Natural and Human Environment

A theme that was commonly expressed was responsible management of the natural and human environment. Air and water quality were frequently mentioned along with co-habitation of people and wildlife as qualities that make Flathead County unique and desirable. Many residents expressed a desire to protect the lakes, rivers, ponds, groundwater and air for future generations. Residents also enjoy frequent interaction with and access to wildlife as a defining characteristic of Flathead County. Commercial use of timber was a resource characteristic that many residents wish to see preserved.

The Flathead County Growth Policy sets goals for achieving successful management of the natural and human environment while guiding continued growth and development. Protecting the cultural resources and heritage of Flathead County while limiting interference with private land management opportunities are a goal of the document.

Preserve the Rights of Private Property Owners

A large number of meeting attendees cited protection of private property rights as a major concern. Few people specifically defined those rights, but it can be assumed that all owners of private property have the same bundle of rights to the use and enjoyment of property. As lots get smaller through subdivision, neighbors get closer. A balance must be achieved between zero-regulation, which allows one landowner's use of land to impact the use and enjoyment and value of a neighbor's, and over-regulation, which could be defined as regulating beyond the goals outlined in the growth policy.

The Flathead County Growth Policy seeks to establish a definition of private property rights that respects the cultural heritage of private property ownership in Montana and protects the same rights of all residents.

PART 2: How the Vision Guides the Growth Policy

A plan created solely to comply with state law does not entirely serve the needs of a community. The seven elements outlined above are used to tie the Growth Policy together and guide the goals of the Growth Policy by maintaining a community context to all state-mandated criteria. The vision is not all inclusive; it represents the seven

elements on which the public are most likely to agree. The goals proposed for each chapter will be crafted to both achieve success in the categories required by state law and to preserve and protect the quality of life that makes Flathead County a wonderful place to live now and in the future.

DRAFT